

Land of the Snow Men



George Belden

LAND OF THE SNOW MEN

Written and Illustrated by George Belden

While Undertaking a Commission for the Philadelphia Explorers' Club
Antarctica

1913

Manuscript Recovered and Edited by Norman Lock

Illustrations Restored by Derek White

LAND OF THE SNOW MEN

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Is there some widespread atmospheric disturbance which will be felt everywhere in this region as a bad season, or are we merely victims of exceptional local conditions? If the latter, there is food for thought in picturing our small party struggling against adversity in one place while others go smilingly forward in the sunshine.

—Robert F. Scott, *The Journals*, Tuesday, December 5, 1911

It is eternal winter there.

—William Blake, "Holy Thursday"

For Captain Robert Falcon Scott, RN

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Editor's Foreword

Little is known about George Belden. One thing is certain, however; he was not in Antarctica at the time of Scott's 1910-12 expedition to the Pole, but the year *after* the disaster. His name does not appear on the list of passengers and crew aboard *Terra Nova*, nor is it mentioned by Scott in his journal or in any other known to have been kept by a member of the tragic enterprise. Belden's own journal, purporting to be that of a witness to the misadventure, is clearly an invention—one which became increasingly whimsical and hallucinatory. His extraordinary account of having been with Scott, Wilson, and Bowers when they perished on the Barrier Ice and his fantastic depiction of the trolley-car hearse, which transported Scott up into Mt. Terror, must be understood as an attempt by Belden to forge a modern myth of the hero. (His manifest dislike for Scott may have rendered this bizarre apotheosis necessary. To what degree guilt was accrued psychically by Belden for his denigration of a man popularly held to be a hero cannot be assessed by a mere literary custodian.)

For a professional man—in no matter how minor a capacity—Belden made little impression on his times, at least on their recorded history. We can only suppose that the assault on his reason suffered at a relatively young age (he was twenty-eight when he went to Antarctica) and his subsequent confinement precluded the world's taking note of him. Beyond the records of his birth and of his having been graduated, in 1908, with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the University of Pennsylvania, documentary evidence of his life is almost nonexistent.

The historian Nicholas Charles Barrett did discover a reference to Belden in a letter written in 1913, by Emma Burke (wife of the Philadelphia "meat-packing king," mentioned in the journal):

Saw George off yesterday. Elizabeth was at the pier and another man, who looked grim and kept silent. Elizabeth was stiff and reserved and, with the exception of a single chaste kiss of farewell, you would not have known she was engaged to be married to the man. (She is very pretty though.) I felt sorry for George and gave him a motherly kiss just before he went aboard. He looked unhappy. I think he would gladly have stayed home if she had called him back again. I could have slapped the girl! I shall

miss him. The garden he made for us in Frenchtown is charming, and I wish he were not going on this ridiculous journey so that he might build the summerhouse. The design he showed us for it is sweetly romantic, like a Fragonard [sic] picture.

We know from a letter posted on July 7, 1913, at Christchurch, New Zealand, by the ship's captain that an American architect had come aboard *Baffin* with the intention "to build, using local materials, a cenotaph on a high elevation overlooking the Ross Ice Shelf."

We also know from its minutes that, seven months before the captain's letter, the Philadelphia Explorers' Club had commissioned an unnamed architect of that city to erect a monument to Scott, Wilson, and Bowers on the Barrier. The club was able to raise, by subscription, money sufficient to hire an architect, outfit him, and pay for his passage to and from Antarctica. Considering these, admittedly, meager facts in light of the text itself, we must conclude that the architect was George Belden and his book is pure fancy.*

* No attempt has been made to verify the historical truth or accuracy of Belden's texts. As they are the product of a sadly deranged mind, the veracity of his commentary is irrelevant. The value of the texts is to be found elsewhere—in their imaginative quality, their uncanny logic, and in the depth of their compassion for the redoubtable, exceptional men who suffered and sacrificed much.

Readers of *Land of the Snow Men* (Belden's evocative title for his journal) have seen, in its author, an inspired precursor of Dada and Surrealism. But there is more of Poe and Stevenson about George Belden than Tzara, Apollinaire, or Cendrars. Whether he had read Poe or Stevenson before composing his journal is not known. Belden refers to only two books: *Pilgrim's Progress*, which he claims to have borrowed from another member of the expedition, and Verne's *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. Belden must also have been familiar with Blake's poetry, having chosen a line from one of "The Songs of Experience" to serve as an epigraph for *Land of the Snow Men*. How Belden came to compose his strange and luminous texts is one enigma among many surrounding the life of this visionary artist.

I discovered Belden and his remarkable journal by accident. I had been for some years in Africa, writing a novel. The strain of living in a country as alien as Africa, with little money and little hope of finding a publisher, caused me to have a nervous breakdown (if one still speaks of having nervous breakdowns). A friend in Mombasa contacted my wife, who arranged for my return and commitment to a private sanitarium in Vermont's Green Mountains. My daughter's fiancé, Andrew Comi, was on staff there at the time; and I was put in his care. During the final weeks of my recuperation, Andrew asked if I would sort

through boxes of old files in the sanitarium's basement and determine whether or not any should be kept. In one of those boxes, I found *Land of the Snow Men*.

According to what was legible in his file (ninety years of damp and neglect had obliterated much of it), Belden had gone mad out on the ice, had been brought back by force and confined in an institution in New Zealand. The following year, he was returned to America, with the financial assistance of Emma Burke. It was she who arranged for his confinement in the Waterbury Asylum (as it was then called), owned by a friend of her husband's. Belden remained there until his death on February 11, 1952, at the age of sixty-seven.

While the cause or causes of Belden's insanity cannot be known, the evaluation made by a doctor late in 1915 at the Waterbury Asylum is cogent: "The tragedy he was meant to memorialize proved too great for an impressionable mind, which gave way under the weight of obligation and sympathy." This judgment—in my opinion—is confirmed by Belden himself, who scrawled repeatedly in the margins of his book: "Hell is Consciousness."

Land of the Snow Men can be considered as the fulfillment of Belden's commission to erect a monument to Scott, Wilson, and Bowers.

It is cold It takes all my
 Strength to grip this pen
 I am writing in the lantern's
 Small circle of yellow light—
 "The Cold on the Shelf
 With him the dogs," Day says
 When he comes to relieve me.
 He is crying; the tears freeze
 On his cheeks like beads of
 glass. "I have been thinking
 about houses," he says. He
 turns his face towards the
 Bay of Sails. ~~Day~~
 In the hut the gramophone is
 playing. I almost weep at the
 sound of Merba's voice. Wilson
 and Evans play Dominos, weathered
 in cigar smoke. Soft soft feet
 tread over ~~Ammon~~ 24. I eat some
 biscuits and honey and remember
 my dream of the white field

Exhibit A—A page from George Belden's original manuscript

I acknowledge a debt of gratitude to my wife, Helen, for rescuing me from a dangerous monomania; to G. Lishkowitz for his generous subsidy during my convalescence; to the editors of publications in which several of the texts first appeared; and to Derek White for his restoration of those of Belden's original illustrations reproduced in this volume. Belden had composed

his gnomic drawings, with a fountain pen, on sheets of ordinary tablet paper, then taped them onto the ruled pages of his journal. In time, the tape disintegrated, the drawings became loose, and a number of them were lost. Those remaining had deteriorated to such an extent that I despaired of using them. But by scanning and painstakingly restoring (in some instances, reconstructing) them electronically, Derek saved Belden's idiosyncratic graphic transcriptions from oblivion. I am grateful to him.

George Belden is buried at a Methodist churchyard in Waterbury, Vermont, in sight of the Green Mountains. A line appears on the grave marker, taken from Scott's final journal entry: "Had we lived, I should have had a tale to tell." It is not known who ordered the inscription, whether it was Belden's wish or some other's. In light of his journal—and Scott's—the epitaph that serves them both is an irony poignant in its understatement. Robert Falcon Scott has long had his immortality; my hope is that George Belden will, after publication of his "tale," achieve his own.

Norman Lock
June 12, 2005
Philadelphia



***Exhibit B**—Discovered in 2004 in Belden's patient file, the photograph was taken, according to a handwritten note on the back of it, in the winter of 1916. The bearded gentleman is Samuel Cliveden, the asylum's chief physician. In the 1880's, he had been associated with Charcot and his seminal investigations into hysteria at Salpêtrière Hospital, in Paris. Subsequently, he became a disciple of Freud's. The man on his left is Charles Hub, Cliveden's deputy. The fair-haired man with his back to the bars is George Belden. His gaze betrays anxiety, perhaps horror, as if he were haunted still by the "Snow Men."*

Land of the Snow Men



Exhibit C—Unreal Geography

Unreal Geography

I intercepted a letter from the Commission, inquiring about the geography.

"It is an unreal geography," I wrote back. Let them wonder!

I am above all angry. To have been taken out of one's bed and set down here, dazed and confused—well, wouldn't you be?

Yes, yes—they needed a consciousness, one unformed by previous associations. A man, in other words, who did not subscribe. They understood that the members of the expedition projected too much of themselves onto this pure white landscape. And I understood how my presence had become essential. But the cold, the hardships! The unrelenting and ever-present chill of the place!

"Why me?" I shouted at the ragged group on the ice.

I did shout that first morning. I had suffered a cruel displacement. I had gone to bed in Philadelphia only to wake where hell freezes over.

If wake I have.

They pretended not to know what I was talking about.

"Why have you brought me here?" I repeated—calmly this time, to let them know I am a reasonable man, not given to fantasy, although the method of locomotion that had caused me to appear before them could be nothing short of fantastic.

"You signed on," they said, shrugging the way people shrug at the obvious, or the incomprehensible. The same shrugging of the shoulders, as if to be rid of something.

They went about their work, leaving me to get dressed.

So I am the quartermaster: the inventory is my responsibility.

"But I know nothing about quarter-mastering! I am an architect, not a storekeeper!"

They laughed as if at a particularly good joke.

"Then you can help Bowers and Oates build snow walls—for the dogs!"

And I did. What was my alternative?

"Suppose you are dreaming of someone," said Oates one evening when we had gone out to check on the dogs. "Suppose he mistakes his dreamed self for reality."

That set me thinking! What if they are dreaming of me? Is that what he was trying to tell me? That this is a dream—mine or someone else's? But he would not say more.

I pinched myself. I'd have chopped off a finger with a snow-ax to be away from here. I pinched myself, but nothing happened. If I'm only a figure in a dream, I might not be able to

wake myself. So I sleep on ... waiting for the dreamer to wake and give me back my self, where the walls are stone and plumb. And the windows reflect green leaves.

Tonight as I stand watch, the aurora is flickering above Erebus. The glacier rumbles. Far below, under sea-ice, the ocean clenches. It is cold; my hands are dead. It takes all my strength to grip this pen. I am writing in the lantern's small circle of yellow light.

"The cold on the ice shelf will kill the dogs," Oates says when he comes to relieve me. He is crying; the tears freeze on his cheeks like beads of glass. "I have been thinking about houses," he says. He turns his face toward the Bay of Sails.

In the hut the gramophone is playing. I almost weep at the sound of Melba's voice. Wilson and Evans play dominoes, wreathed in cigar smoke. Scott sits apart, fretting over Amundsen. I eat some biscuits and honey and remember my dream of the white field under the cherry trees.

Outside, the ice mounds are waiting to receive us.

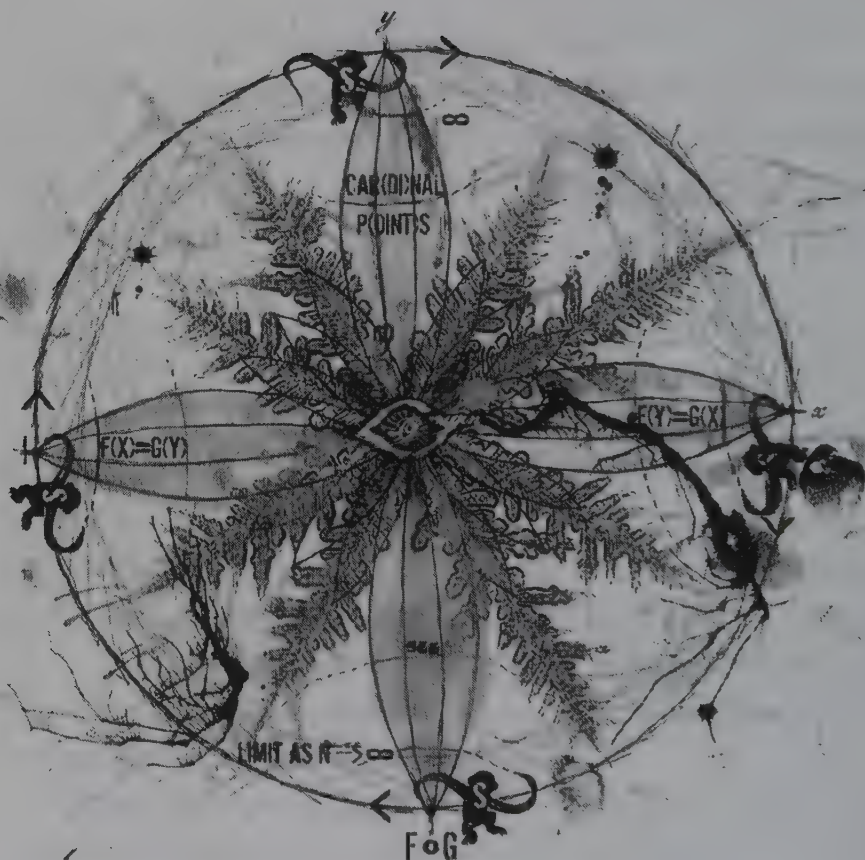


Exhibit D—Lath of the World

Lath of the World

We went blind with looking. Not all at once and not all together, but slowly, one at a time until we clung to each other like the toy monkeys in a barrel we played with as children. There was terror, of course. Consider where we were and what it meant to be in such a place, without eyes. But, curiously, there descended on each of us peace, the peace that comes to one who enters from a vast wasteland into small rooms. The landscape with its appalling limitlessness all at once rushed forward to meet us. Things that had seemed distant were now close—brought within range by the powerful contraction of the horizon. You had only to put out your hand.

“It is best to think of it as a fog,” counseled Scott, whose eyes, like ours, were bandaged. “Blue Glacier and Cape Chocolate, Black Island, and, far off, Mount Terror—what we could see had we working eyes and what we could not, except on the map—remain.” He raised his voice to be heard above the roar of the primus stove. “They are lost only in the way things

are said to be 'lost' in a fog. If we want, we can walk out and touch them like furniture in a dark room."

I remembered coming home late one night from the Society of Architects' annual dinner, trying to pick my way quietly among the furniture only to stub my toe and, yelping, wake my brother. When he turned on the light, things jumped into view as the shadows fled under the table and into the corners of the room.

"It is best to think of it as fog," repeated Scott. "One that will lift and give us back the world again." I listened for the slightest crack in his voice. I think we all did: we would have fallen down it as if through a bottomless crevasse. But the voice was steady.

If I could walk out and touch the Blue Glacier, why not the moon? Or better yet, Quince Street and the narrow three-story house in which my designs for a residence in bastardized baroque style lay on the table waiting for me to finish them? It's ironic that you should end in a place so unadorned, I thought; although the moonlight on the ice formations is sometimes beautiful in a fantastic way that makes me think of Prague. Perhaps it's not so ironic after all. Perhaps I have been brought here to finish my architectural training in the atelier of a master of illusion. I smiled at the thought.

We are, thankfully, well-provisioned. I counted two-dozen jars of marmalade this morning. Regardless, panic wells up

from time to time like ice water through the fissures in our resolve. Scott rigged a ratline running all around the inside of the hut. Using it, we can grope about our business in comparative safety, like a family of blind spiders (though Evans burnt his fingers on the primus). Gran, the Norwegian, and Nelson even managed a cakewalk to the scratchy music of the gramophone. Later, Ponting showed magic lantern slides of his trip to Japan, which we could not see; but his comically inventive narrative did much to lighten our spirits.

"Tomorrow we go," Scott announced abruptly in the middle of the fun.

We couldn't believe our ears! Go!—how *go* when the "fog" still had not lifted?

"We cannot afford to linger!" He cajoled and commanded by turns. "We must continue our journey before the winter storms begin in earnest."

"How!"

"I shall spin our web out the door and onto the ice shelf."

I laughed, thinking it a joke; but I didn't know Scott. None of us wanted to leave our granite hut. Clissold baked bread. Ponting took pictures, consoling himself with the click of the shutter and the smell of the magnesium flash. Wilson and Bowers were teaching themselves to play dominoes by touch. The gramophone played as always. Each night I dreamt of Japan. The cherry trees are in full bloom. The white petals rain

down, and soon the meadow is white. A mild spring breeze whirls the petals away over the green fields, over the silvery branches toward the sea. Why trade one illusion for another, less clement one?

But Scott had no illusions. The "fog" was for our benefit—he needed no such homely figures to survive absence. He understood better than any of us the reality of the polar regions. Like ours, his eyes had been unavoidably blinded by the surface glitter. But he had never been bewitched by the aurora or the sea's mirror dotted with drift ice. One look at the room in which he slept told all: austere. He would have little patience with my decorations, my pilasters and pendentives. He saw *through*—to the lath of the world.

We took off our bandages and went out into the night. I saw something, but what it was I couldn't be sure.

A note from the Commission
 Do not ask how
 I want to record the silence
 its multifarious aspects
 its richness and its poverty
 I steal some of Rottings waxed cylinders
 and set them out onto the ice
 Far from the anguished laying of the day
 With the Edison machine
 Later, agast to hear the screams
 of so many
 I melt the cylinders in the primus stove
 of Hell is consciousness
 Consciousness is Hell
 Would they were I

Exhibit E—Journal excerpt

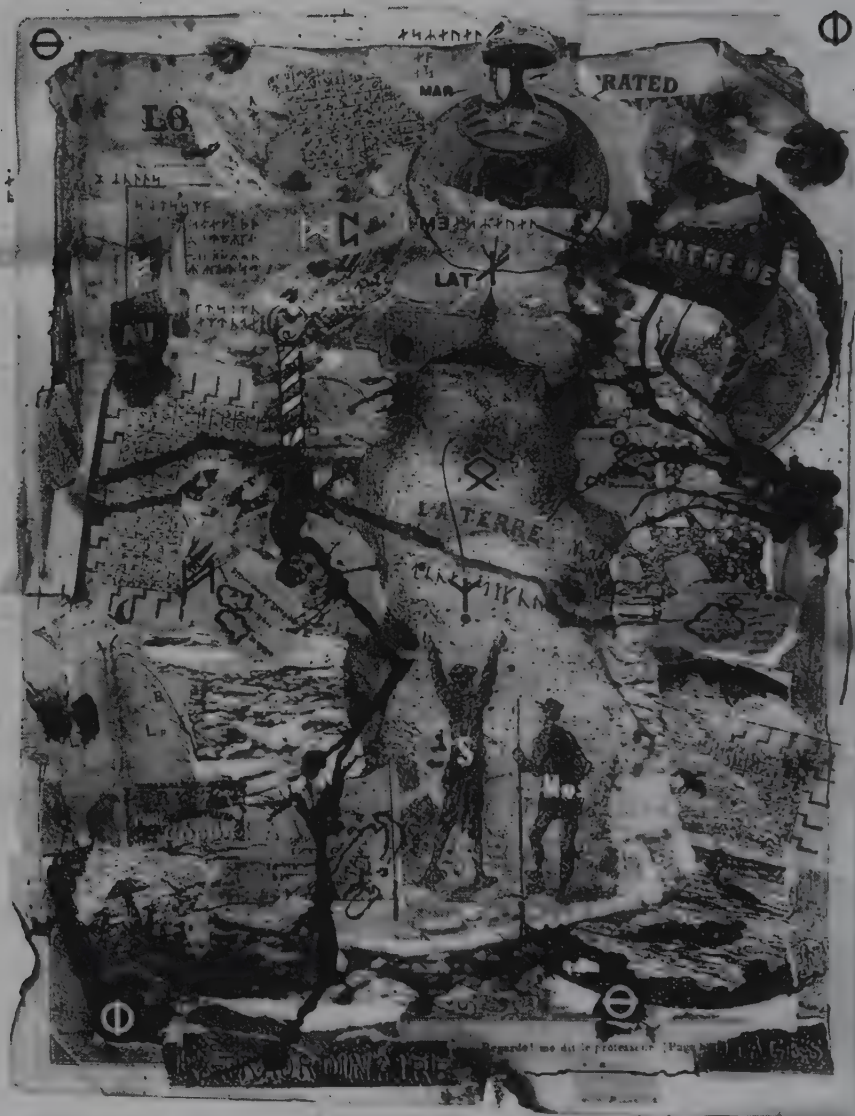


Exhibit F—The Cruelty of Poetry

The Cruelty of Poetry

In Antarctica, Scott saw an opportunity to enter a realm without meaning, one devoid of symbols. We talked at night about Jules Verne and his *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, a ragged copy of which we'd read that winter to pass the time before we would once again take up our journey to the Pole.

"And where do we look for meaning?" he asked, thumping the cover of the book for emphasis. "In the twists and turns of events—in the surprises that come from information rationed out like your jars of marmalade." He smiled at me who, in my capacity as quartermaster, kept a close watch over our "sweet stores" of honey, chocolate, and jam. "The meaning of *our* journey is also to be found in the journey itself, is identical to the journey, and has no meaning except as a journey—a twisting and turning of events leading to one irreducible fact defined by a convergence of longitudes. The Pole is not an object, gentlemen, it's a geographical convenience. One with no symbolic weight whatsoever."

I remembered the cartoons in the newspaper occasioned by Peary's expedition: the Pole had been illustrated by a striped

barber pole bearded with ice, flanked by a pair of tuxedoed penguins. It was sheer fantasy, of course; but one which served to emphasize the absence of anything real awaiting us. Scott is right: the object of our journey is non-existent, or exists only as a destination. Its only symbolism—a barbershop, which in its extreme silliness destroys all mythic potential.

“So the whole thing is pointless,” I said, feeling more than ever the pangs of homesickness. “The Pole is nothing and means nothing.”

“Yes!” he shouted. “And that is precisely its beauty. It is pure and perfect in itself. It exists regardless of anyone’s attempt to make it meaningful. It is not a thing to be picked up and carried home like a sporting trophy, nor is it susceptible to interpretation or criticism. It is not an expression of some higher truth but the most unimaginative and prosaic of facts. My journal will read like the surveillance notes of a private detective who refused to speculate. The Pole has no more nourishment than snow.”

“An adventure yarn is what I like best,” said Evans. “Not something by one of those Bloomsbury types with their slim volumes and slim hips!”

“We call the Blue Glacier blue because it looks blue,” said Scott, ignoring Evans’ lewd pantomime. “Geography should be descriptive.”

Gran remarked that the Bay of Sails sounded suspiciously like poetry. "Takes its name from the drift ice's resemblance to sail boats. That's as pretty a figure of speech as I've ever heard."

Scott was angry. "I want no poetry here! I came to Antarctica to escape interpretation." He sank into his chair, his hands betraying his frustration. "A stone is only a stone until it's thrown through a glass house; then it becomes an adage and admonition. Antarctica has no ulterior meaning. There is nothing beneath the ice except more ice."

But soon after, the pure ideal was debased by Meares, who turned it into a parlor game to wile away our long nights under winter's siege. He and the sledge-men amused themselves by ascribing to our meager possessions arbitrary and ridiculous functions. If things had no meaning, then they bloody well would give them some of their own!

"What's this for then?" he said, holding up a potato peeler.

"To gouge out your eyes. To shove up your bung-hole and take your temperature. To whistle a tune through."

"And this?" He held up a coffee cup.

"To piss in. To throw at Bowers when he's snoring. To slide over the table like a toy iceberg."

"And this?" Meares unbuttoned his fly.

"To test which way the wind blows. To stir your coffee. To tune the queen's piano."

Scott was not amused. He went into his room and slammed the door—hard, so they'd know what he thought of their childish games.

For myself I don't know what to think of his strange obsession.

"It's the connotations that end up clinging to things he objects to," said Gran, putting actual tobacco in his very palpable pipe in order to smoke it. "You must admire the courage of a man who insists on seeing only what is."

We had stepped outside to look at the Southern Lights. We stared up toward the tongues of flame. The sky seemed full of organ pipes.

Evidently, I had no such courage.

The door of the hut opened. Scott stood in the doorway, trembling with indignation. He tossed Jules Verne's book out into the snow.

"I'm beginning to see things! Depths of meaning!" His voice was anguished.

It was then I knew that poetry could be cruel.

The snow
 a shroud
 How well it fits
 The dead
 Still quick,
 I mean the living
 For a while longer
 yet
 What may we endure
 What weariness
 What vain ambition
 To be eulogized!!
 G.B.

Exhibit G—One of several loose sheets found in Belden's patient file. (Date and place of composition unknown.)

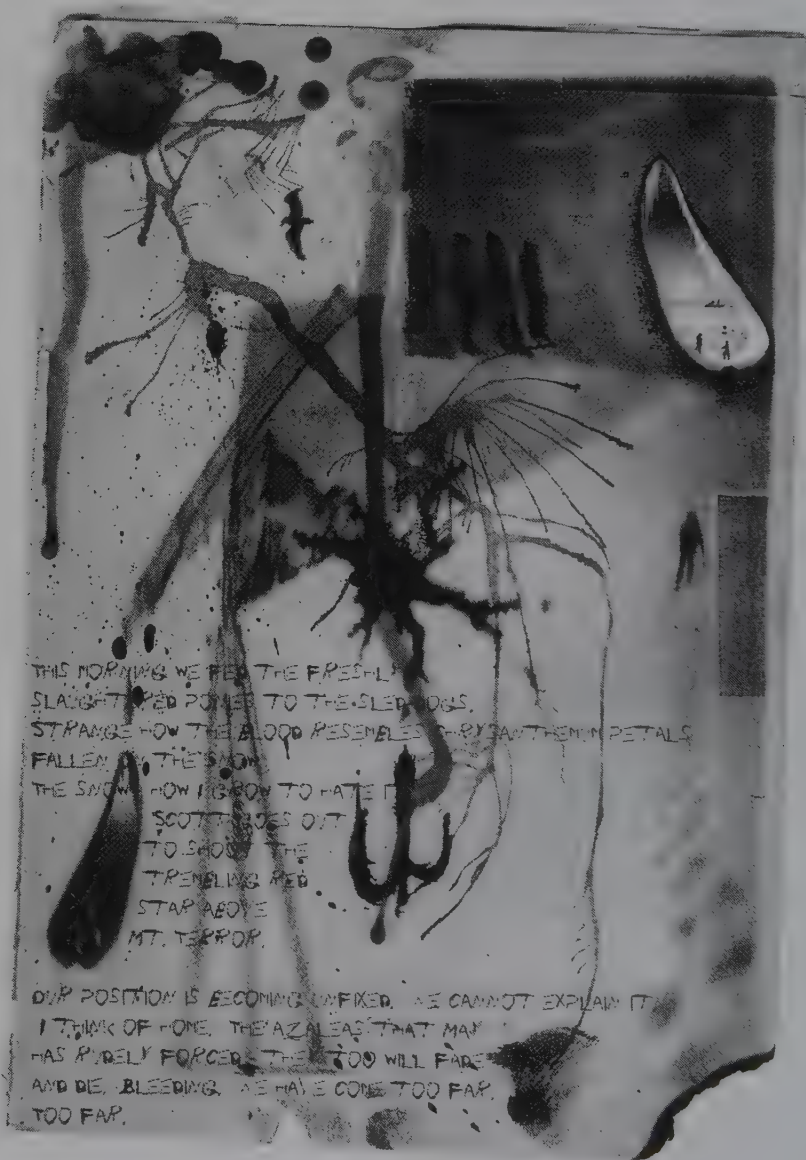


Exhibit H—Defying Analysis

Defying Analysis

Ponting stooped and picked up another dark, raglike object. He examined it, turning it over clumsily in his thick-gloved hands before placing it in his sack. It was the sixth such object he had gathered since going out on the glacier, and each had been treated with the utmost care. As I watched him through the telescope, I could see that a powerful emotion moved in him—whether apprehension or elation I could not tell.

We had left Cape Evans three days before to collect rock samples on the moraine. The weather had since turned savagely cold. Erebus and Terror lay shrouded in snow. In a little while the storm would be upon us, too. I regretted having volunteered to accompany Ponting, but I'd been restless. The click of dominoes, the hiss of the gramophone, the coarse jokes of the sledge-men, and the barking of the dogs had lately grown intolerable.

Out on the glacier, Ponting closed his bag and tied the mouth shut. I watched as he toiled toward me. The way was difficult—even on snow-shoes: the surface of the glacier was broken with fissures. When he had come within fifty yards of

the hut, he leaned on his alpenstock and waved excitedly for me to join him.

I dressed and went outside as he continued his slow trudge.

Behind him the ice desert was a turmoil of snow.

"What is it?" The bitter cold rasped in my throat.

He unwound the scarf from his mouth. "Wait and see!" Clearly exhausted by his exertions, he was, nevertheless, in an exultant mood. "Just you wait and see now!"

As he swung the sack off his shoulder, I wondered at its lightness. Unlike the rocks and frozen clumps of earth he routinely retrieved from the scree, its contents seemed to weigh nothing at all. He unpacked his specimens and laid them one by one on the snow.

"Shadows?"

He nodded. "Frozen shadows!"

They were those of birds mostly. And one that looked as if it had been cast by an iceberg. And one that was unmistakably that of a man. The man's shadow was long, evidently made when the sun had been low in the sky. All were thin as paper. Ponting handled them like delicate glassware, afraid they might shatter in his hands.

"Wait until Deb has a go at these! I'll be surprised if they don't defy even his powers of analysis!"

"How could it have happened?" I felt uneasy for a reason I could not analyze.

"They must have ridden the glacier from a place cold enough to fix shadows like photographs do light."

I touched the shadow of the man and shuddered. Even through my glove, I felt its terrible cold.

"How?" I repeated stupidly.

"Absolute zero—it's not supposed to exist, except in theory. But what if there's a point where all earth's cold settles, a single solitary point on the globe where molecular motion stops? Even particles of light—whose absence is shadow—frozen in their tracks! That could account for it. Or what if by some freakish chance a deposit of silver suspended in the ice were struck by the flaring aurora? Conceivably the ice might become a gigantic photographic plate!"

He was put off by my apparent lack of enthusiasm for his earnest hypotheses. But what had seized my imagination was the *man who had cast the shadow*! Was he one of Amundsen's men? Or Shackleton's? Or Gerlache's? Or had he belonged to one of the much earlier expeditions—Borchgrevink's, Davis' or Weddell's? Might that shadow have been left by an outcast—a Frankenstein's monster, who had taken up a wretched exile in this most desolate of kingdoms only to be lost?

Ponting photographed the shadows where they lay on the ice and then carefully returned them to the rubber sack. He

hung it from a hook outside the hut out of reach of the bears, and together we went onto the glacier in search of other phantoms, for what were they if not the ghosts of the long-gone?

While we were out poking on the moraine with our sticks, Oates arrived with the sled. Fearing the storm, Scott had sent him to bring us back to base camp. Famished and thinking the bag contained food, he brought it inside the hut. Finding nothing but shadows, he set them on the table where they began to thaw.

The melting shadow of the iceberg slid across the table, ending in a puddle at his elbow.

The shadows of the birds flapped their wings and shrugged off into the dark beyond the reach of the acetylene lamp.

The man-shadow raised himself up, lurched to the door and opened it. He paused once to look over his shoulder at Oates before walking out into the black night, which swallowed him.

"It sent shivers through me!" said Oates later. "I had the feeling he wanted to tell me something. Something important like. But he couldn't. There was no way he could, poor devil."

After developing them in his makeshift darkroom, the photographs were found to be blank. They revealed nothing. Only a meaningless whiteness, which could have been snow or a botched exposure. And so, despite Oates' corroboration, we were never able to convince anyone of the truth of what we had seen on the glacier.

We were like the messenger in the story who arrives with a gift of snow from the Emperor of the North for the Emperor of the South only to find it has melted away.

Scott was especially keen to disabuse us, and forbade any discussion on the subject of the man.

"Life here is difficult enough without invoking the ghosts of our dead predecessors," he said. "We're not only racing Amundsen to the Pole; we are studying reality in its purest form. I must insist that you do nothing to adulterate it."

Shadows distract us from objects, which are our proper study.

But even now, so many years later, I want above all else to know the man whose shadow I once touched. And an answer to the question: when his shadow left the hut, did it go to its death or simply to lie down again and sleep?

Or is there another destination?

I must wait for an answer until my shadow and I part company, provided it can survive me.



Exhibit I—The Beauty of Their Bones

The Beauty of Their Bones

Scott's is not the only reality. Each of them has brought his own, along with his wool socks, pocket testament, and, if at all musically inclined, a favorite instrument. Meares has a trombone; the Norwegian, a pianola. Nelson never goes anywhere without a harmonica wrapped in flannel, which he treats with a ceremony and tenderness surprising in one so rough-natured. Ponting cares only for his cameras; his contribution to our communal life is to mediate between light and darkness. In this he is a virtuoso, wresting out of the most unpromising desolation the loveliest of grays. His nightly magic lantern shows counterpoint the stark reality, which Scott regards as the only true one.

We admire Scott. His single-minded determination to study first principles—"life in the raw," in Bowers' words—is worthy of admiration. His is an intellectual rigor beyond our power and—let me confess it—desire. Empty of anything that might give it meaning—history, memory, love—Antarctica serves him well in his pursuit of the ultimate. I should say that life here is like a wire stripped of insulation, and all the more

dangerous for it; but Scott disapproves of similes. Similes, he says, are circumvention: they are used by those who would rather step aside than confront a thing. They are reality once removed. His own speech is plain and precise—a habit of command but also the perfect instrument for penetrating the dark corners of existence, of which we have no shortage.

“Antarctica is a laboratory,” he says. “Here, where it is all but extinguished, life is easiest to isolate and observe.”

I would say a tree is best seen when the leaves are down; but that would be a metaphor, despised even more than similes because they are slyer.

“At least a simile announces its intentions.”

Nelson, Meares, and Gran began to play. They played a round “with holes.” (Bowers and Oates, who would ordinarily have completed the quintet, had gone to Cape Royds this morning for provisions.) Afterwards, they improvised in a most extraordinary manner on an “invisible theme.” It was a knock at Scott, who believes only in a legible universe.

Scott went outside into the snow. I followed him to Simpson’s observatory on the heights above the hut.

“I am sorry for the role history has assigned me.” He seemed to have chosen this moment to explain himself—not to me, I am of no importance: to the world. But as we looked down on the great frozen sea, the world dwindled until there were only the two of us in all of it. “The men consider me a prig ...”

As if we were improvising a music of our own, he paused to leave me a silence in which to protest. But I said nothing. I was waiting. Only later, when we had both resumed our place in the little society of the hut, did I realize that what I had waited for was an admission of doubt. Such an admission might well injure the trust I placed in Scott, but I wanted it nevertheless.

“Ever since I was a boy, I have hated ambiguity. It’s this perhaps more than any other reason that explains my explorations. To eliminate the empty spaces on the map—and in myself. To close them. I’m not troubled so much by an absence of meaning as that there might be more than one.”

And then, for once, he broke his own rule by speaking in a parable. He did it so that I would understand him. He asked me to imagine a kiosk in London, crowded with notices, posters, hand-bills—messages of every sort—public and private—left over the years by people anxious to communicate, left to become slowly effaced by wind and rain. Imagine that one message, papered over or lost in the welter, contains the meaning of the universe. It’s there; it has always been there. It will always be there—unread and unregarded among the trash.

“Now imagine at the Pole is a kiosk with only this one message, plain as day for anyone to read with eyes in his head. A message susceptible to a single interpretation. A message with only one possible meaning.”

"You don't really expect to find it there?" I scoffed. It sounded impossibly idealistic.

"In myself! I expect to find it in myself. But only at the Pole where there is neither distraction nor equivocation will it be given me."

"Who will give it to you?"

"I will give it to myself! I know it—I have always known it. And in the absolute silence at the bottom of the world I will hear it." Silent a moment, he seemed to be listening. He finished almost apologetically: "You understand I am speaking metaphorically."

I nodded my understanding.

And then as if to atone for his flight from reality into the laxities of poetic language, he took a fix on the risen moon and dwelt for a time in the happy realm of logarithms from which all ambiguities are banished.

The aurora flared up, first as a shining bow over the horizon in the south and then as a golden drapery from the zenith above Eerebus down to the mountains in the west. It was a splendid sight, and I stubbornly insisted on its beauty.

Scott allowed that it was beautiful. But he believes that such facile beauty veils the truth. The beauty of truth is subtle and resists the easy temptation to dazzle us.

"As a man I enjoy a woman's beauty. As a scientist I should prefer the beauty of her bones for in them I can see the truth articulated."

I thought then that he was crazy.

Before we went back to the hut, he asked me if I had a recurrent dream since coming to Antarctica. I told him yes, I dream of a garden whitened by falling cherry blossoms.

He nodded.

"I dream of arriving at the Pole only to find Amundsen has already come and gone. There is an envelope addressed to me, and I know that inside it is what I have been searching for. I open it, carefully, take out the letter, and as I am just about to read, the ink blurs and runs. I'm left with nothing, nothing—just one word: 'fistula!'" He laughed a laugh that was neither bitter nor indignant, only baffled that it should be so. That he should have come so far for nothing. "Can you imagine that! *Fistula*, for the love of God! What would Mr. Freud make of that, I wonder?"

I suddenly longed to be back at the hut, in the pleasant company of Gran and the others. I didn't understand Scott. At that moment I would have gone to the other side of the world and stood all alone at the opposite Pole to get away from him.

I hurried toward the yellow-lighted windows.



Exhibit J—Castling to Safety

Castling to Safety

There are some among us who deny its reality altogether. They claim that Antarctica is nothing but a projection of their own despair. For them it is an image of extreme deprivation and, like all images, exists solely in the mind.

"What is the reason for your despair?" I ask.

They reply with a non-committal shrug of the shoulders as if to say, Who knows? Perhaps we miss our mothers, or we are tired of the stone-cold radiators of this run-down establishment on this disreputable back street in which we find ourselves, through no fault of our own.

Deb thinks they suffer from free-floating anxiety. He has always argued that the Great Barrier itself is floating, and believes they may have internalized its imperceptible drift.

"It moves at the speed of a glacier but, nevertheless, it does move. And who can say that such a force as that does not produce delusions in the impressionable?"

He looked at those he considered impressionable with such maddening familiarity that they took off their clothes and walked outside onto the frozen Barrier to prove otherwise.

"You'll see!" they shouted at him. "We'll be back in an hour without so much as a snuffle!"

We ran after them with blankets and dragged them back inside the hut, but not before several fingers and toes had been lost to frostbite.

"It's snowing in Hyde Park," they said. "There's not a soul about."

Scott sees the danger. If the imagination could be isolated in a single organ, he would have it out of each and every one of us like a diseased appendix. He insists that to cloak the true nature of things in language—to transform them with the imagination—is to ensure disaster. And "disaster" in these latitudes (where all longitudes meet) is no figure of speech.

"A metaphor is a bridge leading to confusion. Once crossed, it may not be possible to return."

He lit his pipe and contemplated a moment the phantom of blue smoke rising to the already smoky ceiling. Then he delivered a caution I believed to be irrefutable: "It is one thing to say that the sea is smooth as glass. It is quite another to believe in the literal truth of that statement. To act on that belief is to risk drowning for anyone but Christ, who has no imagination and needs none. Imagination is superfluous in an all-seeing, all-knowing Divinity."

Gran, however, proceeded to refute it by pointing out that, given the thickness of the ice all around us, drowning is out of the question for anyone *but* Christ.

"Only an all-powerful Divinity could manage to drown Himself before spring thaw."

His irreligious remark (intended as a comic aside) provoked a good deal of ridicule aimed at Scott, who was about to castle his king to safety out of reach of Nelson's bishop.

Scott grew angry and swept the chess pieces to the floor with his sleeve. He felt the high purpose of our undertaking slipping away into frivolity or, worse, metaphysics, whose murk he detests and—I suspect—fears.

"Antarctica *is!*" he shouted. "It is out there!" He pointed to the window beyond which there certainly was something white and empty-looking. "And in here as well." (He meant the room in which we had gathered in anticipation of yet another slide show of Ponting's travels—this time in China.) "But where Antarctica *is* not *is here!*" He tapped his forehead twice. "Unless you let it seep in like a cold draft!" Having worked himself up this far, he could only sputter in conclusion: "If you people want to suffer, for Heaven's sake, *do!*"

Day in and day out, the picture outside the window is the same—a lonely, whirling chaos of snow. The picture with its ice cliffs and icy spires suggests portals or prosceniums; but there

is no tension, no feeling that something is about to happen on a bare stage, but rather that something did happen, at the very beginning of time, never to be repeated. I spend the daylight hours, sketching Piranesi-like prison settings—empty, chill, and fabulous.

Peering over my shoulder late one afternoon, Gran wanted to know who they were. I looked at him quizzically. “Those ragged little figures—there.” He pointed to a smudge in the middle distance of the picture.

“There’s no one,” I said. “They’re rocks—look.” I led him to the window and showed him five craggy boulders dwarfed by distance in a field of snow.

He insisted I was wrong, that he saw five men stooped under a white vault of congealed emptiness, in the midst of the void. And though I knew them to be stones, I felt helpless in the face of his insistence and did not argue.

Who can say that he was not right? That what I had taken to be stones was in fact people frozen in the postures of despair at the moment of casting to safety, hoping to exchange one reality for another less hostile. Who can say that this is not the case?

And with what words?

The last light slashes
 the ice mounds
 Scotts swept by cold fury
 I go into a small cloud
 to hide
 I like it here,
 the bass instruments and
 horsehair furniture
 Christ what I not give to
 be home again.
 with Elizabeth in my arms!
 I like this little cloud, how warm
 it is the color of pearl!
 I shall take off all my clothes
 and stroll among the exhibits
 "taking it all in"
 Outside is death
 tumults of light and
 the knives turning in the air



Exhibit L—Women at the Bottom of the World

Women at the Bottom of the World

The first of the women appeared early, on the morning of the 22nd. Bowers was out on the glacier, digging listlessly with a spoon. Looking up from his work, he happened to see her the moment she left the moraine, in spite of the light, which at that hour and inclination was dazzling against the snow. She toiled toward him for upwards of an hour. "I could have covered the ground in half the time," Bowers said later, in the hut, as we sat eating the last of the tinned beef. "Even on these." He pointed to his ruined boots, which were done up in rags.

"I knew almost at once that it was a woman," he said. "It was nothing I *saw*. She was too far away to look like anything but a speck of darkness inching across the white field. But I knew it—don't ask me how."

"What were you doing on the glacier?" asked Scott, moved to speak after an abstinence—a Lent of silent renunciation. His expression was fierce, and we turned from it as you would a teacher with a yardstick in his hand.

Bowers squirmed in his chair, poking at the meat with his fork.

"I asked you what you were doing there?" Scott repeated, rising to his feet with difficulty.

"Digging."

"Digging for what?"

Bowers shrugged and would say no more.

We were gripped by a lassitude whose only relief came in the pursuit of futile occupations. To dig a little hole in the Antarctic snow—with a spoon!—was no more irrational than trying to teach an Emperor Penguin to waltz, like Oates, or, like Nelson, building a belvedere on an ice mound with a view of nothing. Besieged by constant necessity, each of us was making an outpost of the imagination in order to escape. But there could be no escape as frostbite and hunger reminded us.

Scott put on his gloves and went outside. He, too, was spending more time on the ice shelf than could be accounted for by his duties. We dared not ask why. I suppose he had preoccupations of his own. (Frankly, I did not care to know.) His leaving recalled us to the woman, who had slipped our minds. It was not that we were incurious—we who had come *here*; but that we had difficulty grasping anything other than the present moment. If time were a string of pearls, the pearl between our fingers would be all there is—be everything! And also nothing, because the very next pearl appearing between our fingers murders the one before.

Bowers took up the thread again, saying: "When she was close enough for me to see her face, I turned away. I didn't want her to see me like this. She should never have come."

The woman was Bowers' wife. He confessed it as if it were the most natural thing in the world for his wife—any wife!—to be in this iced-over graveyard. He described her for us as if speaking of a girl one might have seen at the seashore, in summer. She wore, he said, a red silk dress, a kind of bonnet, a shawl thrown round her shoulders against the sea air, and shoes. *Shoes!* More than any other, this detail made us laugh. Yes, I said laugh! Think of it! We looked at our broken boots and roared at the idea of shoes! Bowers seemed embarrassed by the color of the dress.

"Red is for tarts," he said.

Did we believe him, that he had seen his wife on the glacier? Yes. Bowers was truthful, always. Besides, we had seen much that was equally fantastic. The polar regions were capable of engendering in us pleasing delusions as well as nightmares. Did we believe that his wife was, *in fact*, here? How could we not once Bowers had produced her handkerchief? (You see it held her scent still.) I doubt that Desdemona's handkerchief discovered on Bianca surprised Othello half as much as that fragrant square of damask did us.

There were little rosebuds on it. I remember thinking how delicate the work was. Little red rosebuds—to go with the dress, I suppose.

We left Bowers to mutter—scowling—about the red dress while we hurried into our parkas and went outside to see this latest improbability.

She was not there. How she could have vanished from sight in so short a time, in so vast and flat a space—wearing shoes!—we could not guess. She ought to have been as visible as a cardinal alighting on snow. Not that we tried to guess; no, by now we had given up speculation. We were—disappointed is too weak a word to say what we were. Our interest in her was frankly narcissistic. It could not be otherwise in men rubbed raw by an elemental nature. We were men without women—yes; but it was our inordinate sensitivity to the slightest movements within our selves that aroused us. For some time now, our care had been to keep watch on our own sensations—like a sick man taking his pulse to make certain he is alive. When I saw those tiny rosebuds, I felt a stirring unfelt for an age. I was amazed! If I had come upon the woman alone and she had been what the color of her dress suggested to Bowers' mind, I would have lain down in the snow with her—never mind what it cost me! Never mind I had died for it! My desire was not fetishism (occasioned

by the handkerchief) or lust (incited by the wish to possess). It was prurient, but only insofar as it quickened me.

But she was not there.

That night I dreamed of the ice mounds. Scott stood alone on one of them. His back was to me, but I knew that he was weeping. Then I saw the reason for his anguish: a ship broken on McMurdo Sound, its ribs stark and white like the carcass of a mastodon exhumed after a long ice age. The ship had come, I suppose, to rescue us from off the ice shelf only to be entombed there. Scott shot a flare into the Antarctic night; and I saw in its sudden magnesium light the faces of drowned men and, here and there, a woman's, long hair spread out beneath clear ice. And I shouted for the death of so many—shouted my anger and pity, both.

I woke to see Elizabeth leaning over me in the dark hut. Her eyes carried in them the candlelight of our last night together, in her bedroom, where she had led me up the creaking staircase and down the hall past her father's room. In the darkness, there had been only her eyes to see, moist and trembling with candle-flame, tears, and love.

"Elizabeth!" I murmured, as I had done then so as not to wake her father. "How—" She silenced my question with her lips, which were—I swear it!—warm.

Next morning, we went outside. I had the foolish notion she would like to see the dogs and the ice-walls I had helped Bowers build. Like his wife, Elizabeth was not dressed for the Pole. But she seemed not to mind the lashing wind that tore tears from my eyes.

I must have known she was not real. All of us must have known that the women who had suddenly appeared at the bottom of the world were, none of them, real. But we did not say so even to ourselves. (No, I cannot explain the handkerchief! I will not even try.) Bowers was fuming that his wife should have "tarted herself up—she being Methodist and having charge of little children!" Wilson shaved and cut his hair and made a bouquet of paper flowers for his sweetheart. Evans concocted a passable cologne from ambergris; and Oates incised an enormous heart on the side of an iceberg, enclosing his initials and those of his Anne. We were extraordinary! And what of Scott? Was he also extraordinary? We did not lay eyes on him during the entire time the women were with us.

"Good thing, too," said Ponting. "He would have driven them out like Christ did the money-changers."

Maybe so, although after the women had gone I did find in the ashes a poem written to Kathleen. (That the meter was clumsy and the rhymes childish pleased me.)

Scott did not have to drive them out. They left of their own will, or ours. We woke one morning to find them gone—

each in his own way, according to the fashion of his courtship. (We had courted them ardently, with the understanding that, should we fail to hold them, something vital within our selves would be lost.) The last of the women to leave was the first to arrive: Bowers' wife. He watched her dwindle to a point where glacier and sky convened in final judgment on our souls. Then she was no more.

As for me, that morning I had opened my eyes, expecting to see Elizabeth's as I had on the two previous mornings; but there was nothing to return my gaze. Only wall and a pair of snowshoes hanging from a nail.

"They were sent to comfort us," said Wilson.

"Bloody fools!" said Scott, turning over on his cot as if in sleep.

It would have been merciful if each of us who was to go into the obliterating snow went there with no memory of a beloved face or of the pressure of a hand in his. Memories that would only increase our anguish. But who was there to show mercy?

Scott turned in his cot as if dreaming the nightmare that imprisoned us.

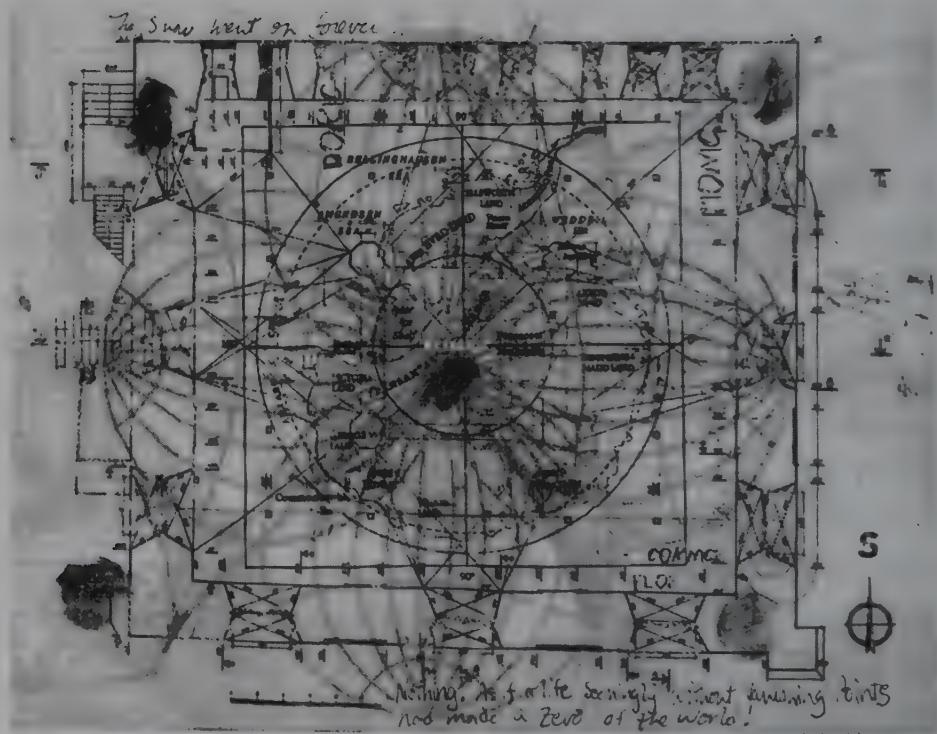


Exhibit M—Orders of Architecture

Orders of Architecture

Too long had we been entranced by the snow. Like the sand of that other desert waste, it now seeped in everywhere, in spite of our rags—seeped into our minds' dark cellars, no matter how urgently we whispered to each other of Levantine women, or Persian, languid in the molten sun. No, we no longer saw the beauty of the regions that had, by their insistence and indifference, vanquished us. We were like suitors for the favors of a Cleopatra—suffering abasement, then shutting our eyes to all that enthralled us. I tell you our eyes hurt after so much looking! After so much lusting after novelties of perspective and emptiness! Then, having closed them at last, we were blind to the sherbet-colored mounds above the Bay of Whales and the shiny ribbons of the aurora borealis. We saw only the endless snow.

And I, who had been an architect, no longer dreamed of the slender columns in the botanical garden—my last commission before arriving at the bottom of the world.

It was the same for all of them. We dreamed of nothing but snow. No more the cherry blossoms on the bough or raining down on the green lawn, staining it pink.

Nothing. As if a life seemingly without vanishing points had made a zero of the world! The snow went on forever. To the common mind, infinity and zero are equally impossible, as are all absolutes. Both are alike in their nullity. In their affirmation of nothing.

A fortnight ago, Ponting smashed his magic lantern slides, in a sudden rage against Antarctica. Through the long winter months, we had been looking at their projection on a white sheet nailed to the wall of our hut. After a time, looking had given way to staring until we had become transfixed by illusory views of Paris, Brazil, Shanghai, Tokyo. We had hoped the brilliantly colored scenes would nourish our dreams, which were destitute. But not even a garish Amazonian sunset or the pink-and-red-petaled bloomers of the *can-can* girls could alter the fixity of our inward gaze. A gaze that comprehended nothing, revealed nothing, and nourished not at all.

Scott despised us and our talk of dreams. His were unknown to me, for he held himself aloof. He may not have dreamed at all, having found a way to will himself to a higher order of sleep. Scott! His mind was as familiar to me as a sled-dog's! But when Ponting smashed the glass slides, I seemed to see in Scott's eyes (they, too, gazing inwardly) the extinguishing

of all—I would not say “hope,” though he might have been hopeless—of all ambition. He, who had once possessed the ambition of a Conquistador!

I looked to him—to Scott—for solace as one looks to a lover, such was his power over me even then. He said nothing. He clenched his pipe’s stem between his teeth as if to signal his resolve to be silent.

I was not the only one in the cramped hut who had turned to Scott. The sigh that followed his abdication (how else characterize that gesture of withdrawal?) was universal. I looked at my colleagues, with whom I had endured so much, and saw in their faces something furtive and shameful. Perhaps it was fear, or that larger, engulfing fear called terror. Or perhaps they pitied him, or hated him, or wished him dead. Who knows the truth of men’s hearts? Not I.

Their eyes had been on Scott only for a moment; then they quickly turned away to look again inside themselves.

The silence was extraordinary! Had the primus stove not been hissing, I would have thought we were all dead.

It was Bowers, who broke it.

“Tell us about architecture,” he said to me; for they all knew what I had been when I was “alive” and in the world of men.

They made noises of assent. Not Scott, of course; he looked at his fingernails as if watching the moons rise in them.

"Tell us about houses," Meares said in his turn.

I began at once—was eager to begin!—seeing in what I would tell them a countermeasure to all that oppressed me. A countermeasure to the dread that Antarctica caused in me. (This dread was like nothing in the world; for Antarctica is itself like nothing in the world—is not of the world—is, in fact—and this is its secret—nothing.)

Yes, it seemed the most natural thing in the world to lecture them on architecture!

"To begin," I said, "there are five Orders of Architecture: Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, Tuscan, and composite. Each comprises the column with its base, shaft, and capital and an entablature. The entablature consists of architrave, frieze, and cornice."

I cited the works of the great "law-givers" of the profession, whose codifications of the columnar practices of the past had led to the formulation of the Orders and the minute proportions governing them: Serlio, Scamozzi, Vignola, Palladio, and Sanmichele. I recalled for my spellbound colleagues the treatises of Philibert Delorme, Claude Perrault, Abraham Bosse, and Sir William Chambers, which dealt with the mathematics of the Orders.

I spoke then of colonnades, porticos, embrasures, esplanades; of roofs—gabled, hipped, gambrel, and mansard; of windows—oriel, Palladian, bay, and rose; of arches—Roman,

Tudor, Syrian, Moorish, and Gothic; of moldings—the cavetto, cyma recta, cyma reversa, ovolo, scotia, and torus.

And as the words tumbled pell-mell from my mouth, there rose up in that narrow hut an edifice, classically proportioned, harmonious in its parts, ingenious in its spatial geometry, and luminous.

We, all of us, saw it shining there! All but Scott, who had left during my recitation to take a measurement with the theodolite out on the ice shelf. I thought it strange that he should do so then and in that place.

Having reached the end of all I knew concerning architecture (all that remained to me), I stopped; and as if putting out the candles after celebration of the Mass, Oates extinguished the kerosene lamps. Instantly, the darkness was upon us. We closed our eyes to it and the terror of the polar night.

"Tomorrow," someone whispered, "we shall set to work on it."

"To work on what?" I asked, the hair rising on the back of my neck.

I had turned toward the voice, but there was no one there.

I slept and dreamed that I was once again in my studio, at home, on Quince Street in Philadelphia. I sat, as always, at my worktable, with the instruments of my profession ranged about

me: T-square, triangle, compass, dividers, French curve. The joy that I had in them and in the green shadows that blew in from the garden outside the window soon faded, to be replaced by anxiety, then horror. I was in the possession of a mind that robbed me of will, making of my hand and arm a pantograph tracing some other's plan.

In the dream, I had been given a commission to design a villa, to be built on the pleasant upper reaches of the Delaware, for a scion of one of Philadelphia's first families. The villa was to be in the Venetian style; and in my dream I saw a grand house of Numidian marble veined pink and red, floating, as if on the water—walls smudged with the shadows of pigeons burnished gold by the setting sun. But try as I might, I could not transfer that lovely vision to the paper on my desk! What my hand produced instead was one of Piranesi's engravings of chill, malevolent prisons. No, it was not I who drew, although my hands held triangle and pencil. I tell you it was not I who drew that prison, but Piranesi—his hand enjoining mine from the 18th century, where he was dreaming still his *Carceri d'Invenzione*.

The drawing done, I rolled it—helpless to resist!—and, putting it under my arm, went outside into the garden, which, in May, was on fire with pink and red azaleas. But as I stepped outside, I saw neither flowers nor garden. The view that greeted

my stricken gaze was that of the Amundsen Sea between the frozen Southern Ocean and the Pole.

I hand the drawing to Scott, who is waiting to receive it—waiting in the name of Piranesi. Scott whistles soundlessly at his men with the whistle used to call the sled-dogs. Meares, Gran, Oates, Bowers, Wilson, Evans, Ponting—they come, stumbling across the ice shelf, clothes ragged, eyes bandaged against the snow-laden wind, their boots falling to pieces as I watch them coming, in fear and with overmastering devotion, to Scott!

Soon the prison will be finished—its alien arches and iron stairs desolate in the shadow of Mt. Erebus—and Scott will lead us inside.

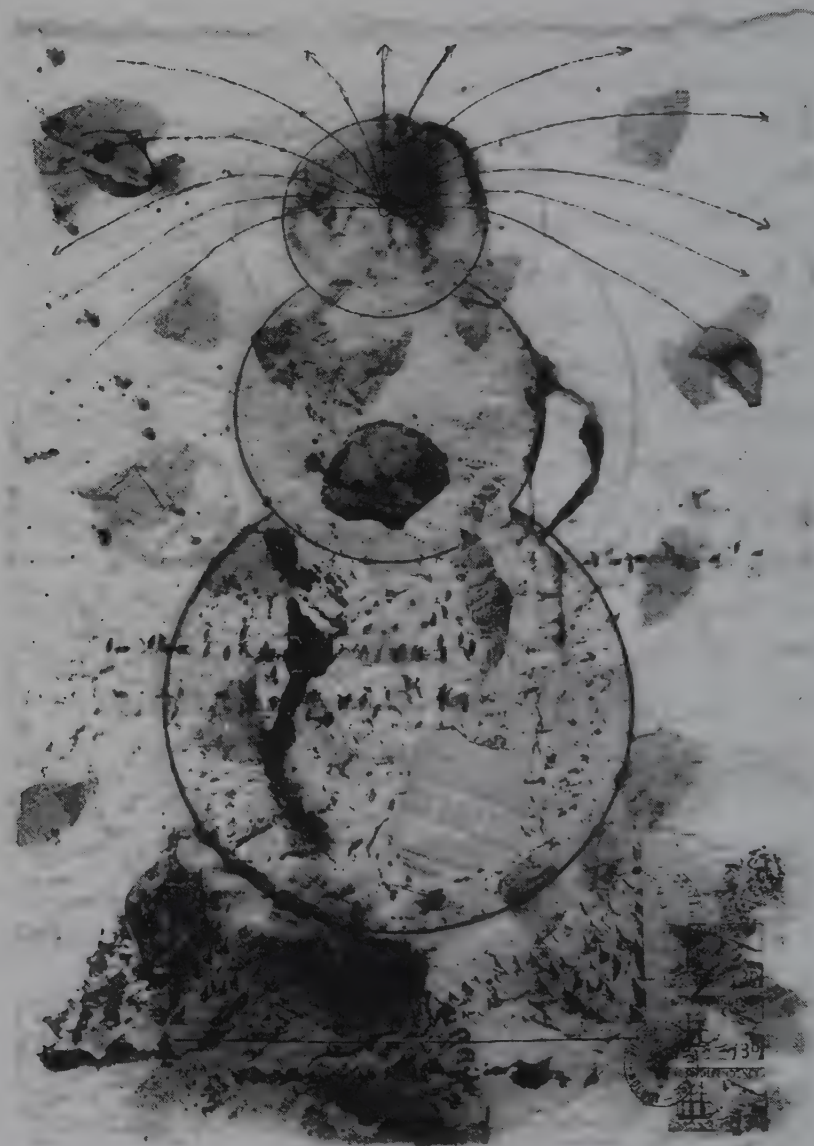


Exhibit N-Waltz of the Snow Men

Waltz of the Snow Men

After the last pony had been slaughtered and fed to the dogs, we forsook reason and all science and clung to their opposites. We did so with the fervor of savages raising an altar on which to sacrifice innocence to their carnivorous gods. Scott was to be our sacrifice. He had led us here; and with his immolation, we hoped to escape our doom. It was not his body we wanted to annihilate but his naïve convictions. We wished for the death of his unswerving belief in enlightenment and the perfection of men through suffering. We were done with suffering and enlightenment; done with branches of knowledge, which had been our rock and hope of salvation. Astrology, divination, numerology, horoscopy, augury—these were our new sciences. Our devotion to them increased in proportion to the perversity of their observance. The more arcane the rituals, the more giddily we embraced them. Each fortune told, palm read, portent studied, horoscope cast, each dog's entrails examined for the insinuations of Providence was another nail in his coffin. Scott was powerless to resist—so puissant is irrationality, so seductive are the Lares and

Penates of the madhouse. Sensing his danger, he fled one evening into Mount Terror, like Moses waiting for the Tablets of the Law. Without his dour presence to chasten us, we rioted in unreason. We drank the elixir of false hope until we were blind to the visible universe and deaf to all but the inaudible. We became instruments of the supersensory world and agents of spiritualism.

I tell you we were mad!

Ponting became the Bruno Vico of our science. It was he who conceived the idea of contacting the dead. His failure to photograph the aurora had turned his mind toward the uncanny. He descanted on "animistic disturbances" generated by the Pole's electrical fields. He described for us "ebullient cascades of heavy energy" attracted by Antarctica's rich magnetic ore. He was convinced that this energy was a by-product of death and constituted, together with certain luminous elements, the soul. Within the polar fields, the soul is "vexed and galvanized." It can be seen but—like ghosts—not photographed.

"How explain the photographic plate's insensitivity to the aurora, unless it is not light but a visible aspect of the universe comprised of something other than light?" Resorting to metaphor (forbidden by Scott), Ponting declared: "The aurora borealis is candles lit for earth's numberless dead."

We were thrilled by Ponting's insight into the Pole's chief ornament and mystery and enchanted by his formulations. We toasted him with the restorative brandy and acclaimed him our expedition's new leader. But knowing his place within English and naval hierarchies, he declined and insisted we drink the health of King George and of Scott. We did so, gladly, in a mood compounded of frivolity and earnestness, both. Ponting did consent to become a kind of priest or metaphysician for our beleaguered band. Intuiting that the continuous vexing of the polar confluence of souls made them communicative, he improvised a spirit annunciator with an eye-chart and an empty tin of plum tobacco. (The eye-chart was used to measure snow blindness.) The annunciator was nothing more than an Ouija board: but we were, nevertheless, impressed by his ingenuity in fabricating it with the slender means at his disposal. We cheered him in the English fashion—the "hip, hip, hooray!" leaving a foreign taste in my mouth strangely reminiscent of oysters.

That very night, Ponting, Nelson, and Oates—fingertips crowding the inverted tobacco tin—sought the intercession of the spirits, especially those illustrious dead who had preceded us in polar exploration—north or south. The experiment was a failure. Yes, the tin moved; and we did invoke Sir John Franklin, who had perished of starvation in the Far North sixty-five years before. But attempts to make our own plight

understood were frustrated by his ranting against the cannibalism of his expedition's survivors, and by another named Paolo Vargas, who had been, in life, a *vaquero* and was now obsessed by pampas grass and a woman called Dolores.

Not disheartened, Ponting sequestered himself behind a blanket partitioning a corner of the hut, in order to "give the matter thought." We finished the last of the medicinal brandy and amused ourselves with the annunciator, attempting to make contact with Dolores but managing to invoke instead a child named Daphne, who complained of the absence of Turkish taffy in the afterlife. Forgetting our desperate circumstances, we were, to a man, saddened by the little girl's privation. We ransacked our provisions for sweets and discovered some barley-sugar candies, which we deposited on the eye-chart. Alas, Daphne was unable to materialize so much as two fingers of a hand to obtain them. The thwarting of her desire threw her into a fit of unappeasable weeping. She would not be consoled; and in the end, we were driven to throw the annunciator into the primus stove to silence her. We would have run out into the storm otherwise—such was our dismay.

The brandy and any further possibility of consultation with the dead at an end, we yielded to hopelessness, which had been lurking in the shadows of the hut. In a word, our insouciance evaporated. We were cast down into the pit of

despair, or the Slough of Despond, if you know your Bunyan. (A volume of *Pilgrim's Progress* belonged to Meares. I would have preferred a rattling adventure yarn or murder mystery.) We were earnestly debating the most painless means of ending it ("it" referring to our miserable lives), when Ponting stepped from behind the blanket.

He was smiling, as he produced the gramophone horn.

"That's mine!" Oates objected; and I marveled that one, who moments before had been passionately advocating death by exposure, should be concerned with the niceties of private property.

Ponting ignored him, eyes bright with whatever brilliant idea he had formulated during his sequestration behind the blanket. He showed us the horn.

"Yes?" we said as one—if not with our mouths, then with our eyes, which betrayed our perplexity.

"It is—Antarctica is—a kind of enormous receiver—for wireless messages from the aurora—the dead!—electrical energy—impulses transmitted through the surrounding ether—received by the polar region." He delivered himself of his idea as if telegraphing it. It was an astonishing performance that affirmed for us Ponting's undeniable genius. We waited for more.

"I can convert the gramophone to collect and condense transmissions from the aurora; and with this"—he flourished the horn—"we shall hear them speak!"

"Hear who speak?" asked Bowers, whose intellect was dulled by hunger and the anguish of the long winter.

"The dead!" Ponting cried impatiently. "All I need do is modify the carbon-button."

"But that's my gramophone!" Oates protested, refusing this expropriation of his property in aid of the general welfare. "My father gave me it when I left England."

"You can have it back again once I've finished," said Ponting, who was becoming shamelessly high-handed. He turned toward the machine and would have set about converting it, if Oates had not jumped onto his back. Centaurlike, they shambled about the hut, upsetting crates and destroying several meteorological instruments.

Nelson and Bowers managed to separate the two men, then tied poor Oates to a chair. Oates, exhausted, fell asleep with music-hall abruptness, while Ponting fiddled with the gramophone. Just as Ponting had claimed, the modification took practically no time at all.

"And what recording will you play?" Wilson asked him.

"None," said Ponting. "The machine will 'play' the voices of the dead. Hopefully, there will be someone there to tell us what to do."

"John Franklin was no help at all," Meares remarked bitterly.

"It will be simpler if we can hear them speak," said Ponting. "The annunciator was too primitive."

Oates said something in his sleep, but I could not make out what.

Ponting cranked the handle. In a moment, the gramophone crackled into life. The crackling differed in quality from the machine's usual noise in prelude to a voice lurching into song. It made me shudder and caused the hair to stand up on my neck.

"Might that be the famous Music of the Spheres?" asked Meares flippantly, hoping to disguise his uneasiness beneath a joke.

"Quiet!" Ponting hissed.

We waited, aware of our stentorian breathing.

Suddenly, the crackling stopped; and a voice began. It was weak and halting as if unused to speech, dry as rust, and German. Or more precisely, Austrian.

"Who's there?" said Ponting; and in his ordinarily confident voice, we heard something like fear, if not fear itself. "Who's there?" he repeated, for the Austrian had not answered him.

"Strauss. Johann Strauss the Younger."

"The Waltz King!" said Oates, who had wakened. "I have his "Beautiful Blue Danube" and "Roses from the South."

(Had—for Oates' recordings had also been smashed by the centaur!)

"I am Johann Strauss," the voice said more vigorously.

(Although I speak no German, I understood him nevertheless.)

"Are any polar explorers there?" demanded Ponting, who had no ear for music.

"None."

"Damn!"

"Can I get you anything?" asked Wilson, fatuously, I thought.

"I wish to play for you," said Strauss. "A new composition. I have been waiting for human ears to hear it played."

"Do you have an orchestra there with you?" asked Wilson; but Strauss did not answer him, considering the question perhaps impertinent.

"I call it "Waltz of the Snow Men," he announced as if from a bandstand in Vienna.

No sooner had the orchestra begun to play than we were possessed by a sadness impossible to describe. It was ours—our sorrow, here, in what Scott had once called the Land of the Snow Men. We bundled joylessly into our coats

and gloves (there was no joy in this music) and lumbered onto the ice shelf. And then, each of us taking a Snow Man in our arms, we began to waltz.

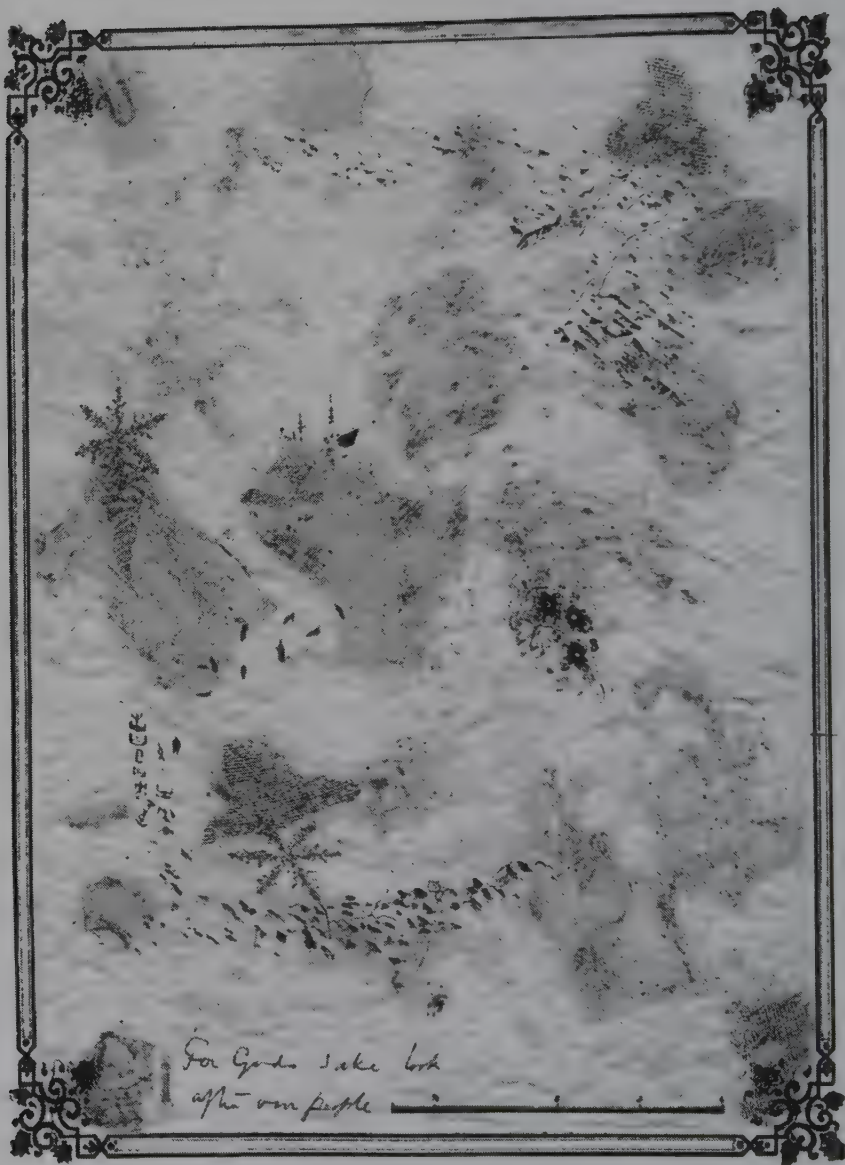


Exhibit O—Out of the Land of the Snow Men

Out of the Land of the Snow Men

He would not leave the shroud that the snow was knitting to perfection—one he might have admired had he still his mind on the world. There was nothing to detain us further, now that Wilson and Bowers sat dead in the corner. I looked at them through iced lashes and wondered, idly, if they could hear the barrel-organ bellowing outside the tent. It sounded like the crack and thunder of an avalanche. I despise bombast. My art aspired to lightness and immateriality. Mrs. Burke, wife of the meat-packing king, called the summerhouse I had designed for her “a dream in chiffon!” Was it for this I had come to Antarctica, where all is ponderous yet curiously insubstantial? To build a house in chiffon spun of snow? Curious, how ice is a weld of fibers. If one could reproduce the mechanism and adapt it to temperate climes... Of course, I had not come to the polar regions in the usual way. I had neither wished nor willed myself here, but had simply *happened* here. I had cursed Scott for his meddling, before I understood that I was alien to his imagination and therefore unwelcome to his kingdom. He had made the best of me and I, of him.

"Scott!" I called.

I had to call to make myself heard over the raging outside, if outside there was. I was not such a fool to think I might not have also died, with my two friends. Scott was not. A friend, I mean.

Scott was not. Funny rhyme and strangely true.

"Scott!"

I shouted this time in spite of the fear it caused in me, as if shouting might shatter something beyond repair. A precious vase in which my life was collected—soon to contain my ashes.

Japanese, like the one I had purchased for the meat-packer's wife, to stand in the embrasure behind the reflecting pool. Lovely thing—red lacquer with slashes of blue! I remember how the moon's face looked one night, reflected in that pool. The air was so still! And my Elizabeth's face lying on the unruffled surface black and smooth as onyx. No.

No, she was never there. Where then? Perhaps it was the lake that I remember, where we had stayed the night in a hikers' cabin. I taste lake.

Taste lake—I'm full of rhymes tonight.

"Scott!"

"What is it?" he answered, peevishly. I had distracted him from his contemplation of an inner vision haunting him still. His hell, and ours. He had given us it—made it our own.

What a salesman you are!

"There is nothing now to stop our going," I said, nodding toward Wilson and Bowers, whose faces seemed to have been transformed into marble.

What kind of marble?

Parian.

Scott, you have made me your architect!

Of what?

Of your tomb!

"What are you laughing at?" Scott asked. His peevishness gone, he addressed me as a kind teacher would a backward child kept after school.

"You can leave them now," I said. "You have done your duty and your best. No man could have done more or asked more of himself. You have nothing to reproach yourself for, Scott. You have carried us as far as is possible. You cannot go further. No one expects you to carry us into the valley, the vale, beyond the bourn, *et cetera*. You cannot ask it of yourself. Perhaps if this were a ship, one final act of lunacy would be asked of you: to go down with it. But there is no ship, and Antarctica is as far down as it gets. We can't go any lower—not in this world. You can only sit and do nothing. Inaction, Scott—you have never been a man for inaction! What will the Royal Navy say about your ... paralysis of will? It will be a black mark against you, if you forget your commission. It's your duty to

lead, even if it's only me that's left to follow you. It's best to go now, Scott. You can do nothing more here."

"Leave them without burial?" Scott said, but it was to someone other than me he said it.

"The snow—the beautiful snow is fixing their shroud." Christ, the disgusting poetry I am capable of when I am afraid. "And they will build for Wilson and Bowers a fine chiffon mausoleum. Look—I've designed it myself!"

I held up nothing.

"They?"

"The same ones who brought me here."

"I ought to say the Offices for them."

I nodded, and he said them.

"Now let us be off," I said cheerfully, taking his arm. "Our holiday is short. Soon, we will be going home."

The snow lay all about the world like powdered sugar on a cake. The sky was blue. I had not seen such a blue since leaving New Zealand aboard *Terra Nova*—how long ago now?

"Look at the sky, Scott! Would you lift up your damned eyes a moment and see that blue!"

But he would not, preferring his boots, which wore little hats of snow on their toe-caps. I tell you it was wonderful—the day was wonderful! I felt like a boy gone outside to see what a night of snow had done to the world!

A trolley-car appeared from out of the sun. It seethed to a stop for us. I shoved Scott inside; and it lurched forward, swaying on the clicking rails. Snow melted into rings around us where we stood, holding the leather straps. The bell clanged, leadenly.

"It wasn't a barrel-organ at all," I said to Scott. "It was a trolley-car! What a noise it makes!"

In the distance, a city trembled—its towers and steeples shining. Just beyond, a thicket of masts stuck up, waiting for commissions, for favorable winds and tides—waiting for captains.

"There's a ship for you, Scott!" I shouted into the wind that swept like a gale through the swinging car. "Her hold is full of snow—a present for the Emperor. He will give you his favorite daughter."

"His daughter...?"

"If you don't want her, give her to me."

Fickle I may be, but I know Scott had not forgotten his Kathleen!

"Is that what you're thinking of, Scott?" I asked. "Your wife?"

"I must go back," he said, looking at me now as if I were something more than glass or thin air.

"We are!" I said, but I knew he meant elsewhere than England.

"I must go back," he repeated, the steel in him showing once more.

"But you can't!" I shrieked; or perhaps it was the wind that shrieked—a *Dies Irae* on Mt. Terror.

He was determined to get off. I might have fought him, overcome him, bound him standing to the leather thongs. What then? Already, the cold was annexing, for the Land of the Snow Men, his remains. In a moment, they would acclaim him their king. His eyes slid off mine. His gaze had been cold; and as it searched the narrow car, it clad everything in ice.

Scott was dead.

Jumping off, I left the empty trolley to him.

I stood in the snow-covered street and watched the car veer away—Scott's funeral car—toward Erebus and, beyond, to the Southern Ocean where the sun milled sheets of gold to pave the cities of the dead.

The trolley bell tolled for the last of the Snow Men.

Scott would return to them—to Wilson and Bowers—and search until he found a way back into the tomb. No matter how long he must look, no matter how cunningly it had been sealed by the wind's icy hands, he would find it. For there was this about Scott: he was faithful to his obsessions. He would climb into the grave with his men. No matter he did not love or understand them. He would enlarge the territory of our

understanding of death, while his flesh turned to stone. To Luna marble brought down from the 5,000-ft. peak of Mt. Altissima—stone the color of purest ivory. Yes, he had succeeded in making me his architect!

I went on toward the city, exulting—exulting I tell you!—to be rid of Scott at last. He was one in love with death while I—I wanted nothing more than to return to Quince Street and Elizabeth and build for the meat-packing king a folly for his garden.

You are well out of it, I told myself and wondered if I were wrong.





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